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## Calling Attention to Campus Trends: Let's Talk About Wellness

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## **Calling Attention to Campus Trends: Let's Talk About Wellness**

Two years after the onset of the coronavirus pandemic, we continue to unveil social injustices and societal failures. One of the most harmful and detrimental of these failures has been the “grind” culture that has encouraged individuals to forgo their individual wellness in the sake of career and job sacrifices. This concept refers to the normalized standard of making one’s work the center of their identity and status that requires complete depletion of an individual’s resources and time (Absher, 2020). One must keep the hustle going and renounce rest or breaks in order to utilize every moment towards fulfilling workplace duties and advancement. Even more alarming are the increased demands the pandemic brought onto social welfare and healthcare structures with unmatched support for these professionals. With the increased strain on caring professions to support our communities, it is unsurprising that over 20% of caring professionals have left the field altogether following the start of the pandemic (Levine, 2021). Individuals in all fields, especially caring professions, have decided to take the opportunity to address their needs, desires, and aspirations following the aftermath of the ongoing pandemic. Consequent to this shift, perhaps many are beginning to explore caring for themselves through the practice of self-care.

The concept of self-care is gaining traction among caring professionals and higher education students, in undergraduate and graduate programs alike. Presently, we are battling the misconception that self-care is solely the responsibility of the individual, which fails to address external stressors and institutions’ impact on one’s wellness. Self-care goes beyond the notion of splurging on a \$7 iced coffee or a shopping spree to cure a bad day. This concept refers to the intentional and continuous effort to address the many spheres of individual wellness to promote overall health: economic, emotional, mental, social, physical, and spiritual (Diebold et al., 2018). Research has demonstrated the significant benefits of daily self-care practices on individuals’ wellbeing. However, self-care tactics can only aid individuals in promoting their health for so long if institutions do not acknowledge the immense stress and heavy workloads

placed on employees and students. If this trend continues, educational institutions and employers are failing to support their professionals which only results in these significant burnout and turnover rates.

Of additional concern, understanding the importance of self-care is crucial to address the retention and wellbeing of students and professionals. Of the caring professions, Social Work has been gaining traction in promoting the importance of educating and normalizing self-care on the personal and structural levels (Gilin & Kauffman, 2015). The National Association of Social Workers [NASW] (n.d.) has recently added professional wellness and self-care to their code of ethics. This is a small victory in addressing the importance of wellness among social work professionals. Other fields could take this opportunity to enact similar efforts to promote and encourage individual wellness. Educational institutions should also consider further exploring ways to support student and community wellness while providing the necessary tools for success in the classroom and beyond.

### **How are Educational Institutions Responding to Students' Wellness?**

Among educational institutions, mental health and well-being concerns are on the rise. According to a Healthy Minds Network and the American College Health Association survey, higher education students' rates of anxiety have increased from 17% to 31% in the past six years (Roberts, 2022). These elevated rates of mental health concerns among students warrants immediate attention by universities and colleges. Students suffering mental health concerns are twice as likely to drop out from educational programs compared to those with no mental health concerns (Eisenberg & Lipson, n.d.). The ongoing mental health crisis impacts student retention rates and drops in student involvement on campus. It is vital for students to learn self-care practices in the classroom to ensure satisfactory completion of their academic programs and to develop the skills required to be a successful student and professional (Diebold et al., 2018). Through mental health programs (some of which are mentioned below), students are supported

to reach their full potential in achieving academic success and experiencing opportunities that foster professional and personal growth.

Educational institutions are actively addressing the health and wellness of their students. Such institutions include Drexel University, The University of California, and Bridgewater State University. Drexel University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, has recently implemented a mental health kiosk to address the mental health needs of their community. These kiosks, located in recreational centers on campus, allow students to "receive a checkup from the neck up" (Roberts,2022). Students are welcome to engage in these kiosks for a few minutes to answer a series of questions on a private screen addressing mental health concerns. After the assessment, students are provided information about further mental health options and assistance offered through the university. This voluntary program allows students to anonymously address their needs and to learn about resources available to them.

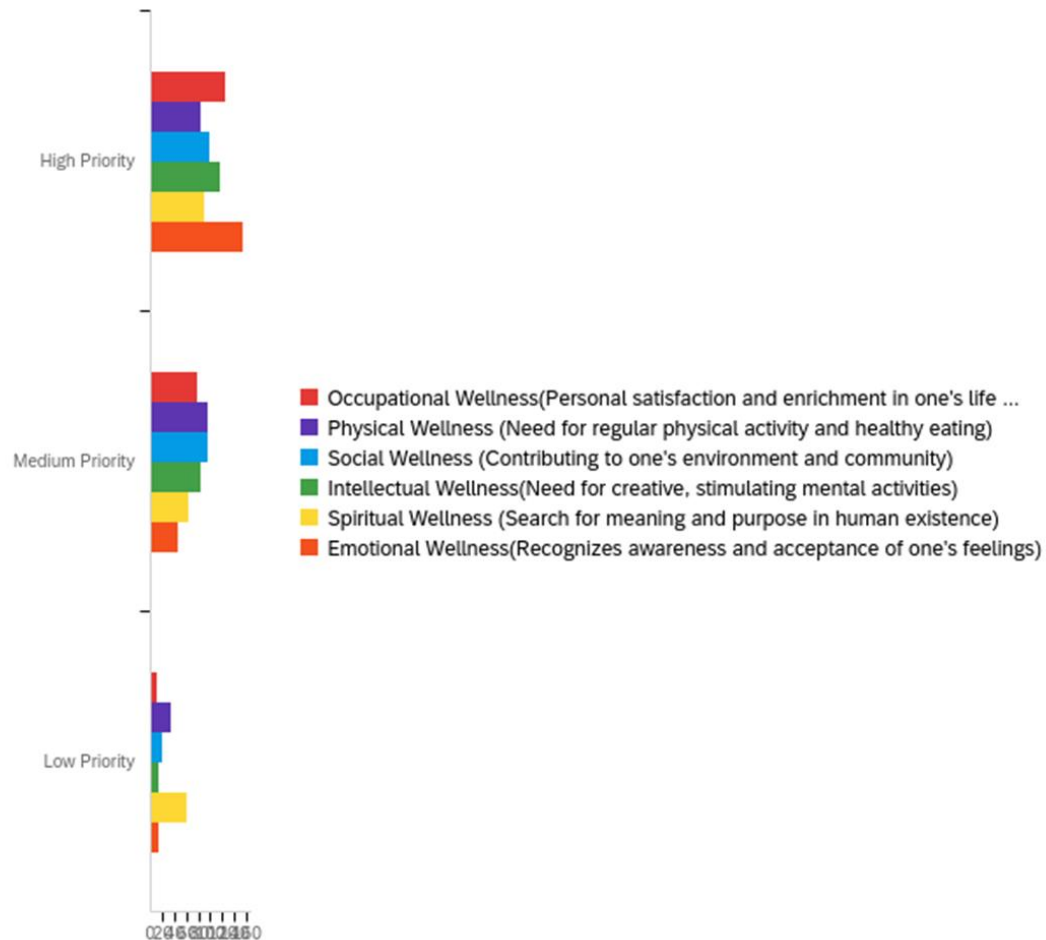
Similar to the mental health kiosks, the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) has implemented resources to assess students' mental health concerns to receive the appropriate supportive services. UCLA has promoted the Depression Grand Challenge that provides students the opportunity to engage in a brief survey that determines if individuals have mild to severe anxiety, depression, or suicidal thoughts and refers them to available campus supports (UCLA, 2022). Data collected through this program is interpreted by university researchers who log responses throughout students' four-year educational career. Students can further be referred to an interactive online program, This Way Up, that provides remote Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) to address mental health concerns (UCLA, 2022). Additionally, the university offers all students counseling and peer support.

Other educational institutions have explored a variety of therapeutic and wellness programs and services for its students, such as the use of therapy dogs, wellness centers, and peer supports. Therapy dogs demonstrate many positive benefits, especially helping students develop a stronger sense of belonging and cope with feelings of homesickness and loneliness and

reduce anxiety and tension (Penn State, 2022). Reflective of these highlighted benefits, Bridgewater State University has implemented therapy dog sessions through their wellness center.

**Bridgewater State University Graduate Students Share Wellness Concerns**  
***School of Social Work Research on Wellness and Self-Care***

Responding to the increased needs of students attending Bridgewater State University, the School of Social Work has been conducting ongoing research into the topic of student wellness. Since the Spring semester of 2020, the School of Social Work has been gathering data on social work students' perceptions on their wellness and attitudes surrounding the concept of self-care. This study focuses on undergraduate and graduate social work students attending the university, providing insight to one population of students within the university community. The graph below shows how social work students prioritize six main spheres of wellness: occupational, emotional, social, intellectual, physical, and spiritual (Hettler, 1976).



Based on current research findings, social work students surveyed (n= 213) reported emotional wellness (73%) and occupational wellness (60%) as the top priority spheres of overall well being. This was followed by 45% reporting a medium importance of both physical and social wellness. This population is actively working towards obtaining an educational degree in a caring profession field with high stressful demands and great individual tolls. This research further examines the mental health conditions impacting this population. Reflective of student reports (see table below), there are high rates of anxiety and depression among social work students. These high rates are concerning with 73% of participants reporting a high importance on emotional wellness while simultaneously reporting significant mental distress; almost half report living with significant anxiety, depression, stress, and mood related disorders. It is essential that the needs of this population, and that of the entire student body, is addressed by

teaching appropriate skills to manage the demands of educational programs and their respective fields to ensure individual and community well being and success.

<b>Mental Health Disorder of Social Work Students</b>	
Anxiety	99
Depression	64
Posttraumatic Stress Disorder	30
Mood Disorders	13
Attention Disorders	15
Learning Disabilities/Limitations	1
Eating Disorders	5
Obsessive Compulsive Disorder	12
Other	4

Exploring the impact of wellness and barriers in obtaining an overall state of well being, this study further looked into perceptions and practices of self-care. Interestingly, almost all participants that engaged in this portion of the study reflected on the importance of self-care and viewing self-care as a journey. Students reflected on self-care being a work in progress and an “unlearning” of negative perceptions of focusing on oneself. Several students shared the development of self-care practices following traumatic experiences in order to cope and engage in self-discovery. However, many identified feelings of guilt in taking time and resources to invest in their wellness. Individuals further reported on barriers of time, energy, and financial constraints in practicing self-care techniques. Perhaps this is where university support could intervene?

While this study is ongoing and looks at multiple facets in relation to student wellness, evidence provided thus far paints a picture of the social work student experience and needs. In order to best address the needs of Bridgewater State University students, other departments should consider implementing similar exploratory research to better learn who the community is composed of, their needs, and the services that would best support their success. We are amidst a cultural shift that is prioritizing wellness, well being, and self-care. Educational

institutions are in a position of opportunity to set the example of practicing self-care and addressing one's needs through services, programs, and opportunities to practice effective interventions.

### ***Bridgewater State University's Response to Student Wellness Needs***

Mental health is a significant priority at Bridgewater State University (BSU). The University has addressed the mental health challenges students on our campus face by offering a variety of services. BSU offers mental health support through the Wellness Center, therapy dog sessions, group support meetings, online resources, and student-led activities. The university has been dedicated to addressing student needs through continued evaluations and research on student wellness to tailor resources accordingly.

#### ***Wellness Center***

The university offers a Wellness Center that includes counseling services, peer and group support, and therapeutic services. Counseling Services offered aim to enhance students' emotional, social and intellectual development; providing consultation, program development; and education for students, staff, and faculty (BSU, 2022). Resources available provide preventative mental health outreach programs for the University, believing that concerns can be addressed before they become a problem for the individual or the community.

In addition to counseling services, BSU provides a health promotion center. The Health Promotion Center fosters students' academic and personal success through providing individual consultation, prevention efforts, therapy dog services, and educational outreach to the university community (BSU, 2022). The aim of the center is to support and encourage the university community and individual students to think critically about healthy decision-making. Their objective is to prepare individuals and groups to take meaningful action to reduce harm and increase positive, health-related behavior. In supporting students' wellness, BSU further offers remote therapeutic services.



Responding to the COVID-19 pandemic and expressed desire for more remote services, BSU has implemented online therapeutic services. Bridgewater State University recognizes that not every student is comfortable seeing counselors in person. Of the remote services provided, BSU (2022) offers students a program called Kognito. Kognito is an app simulation that lets students practice conversations with a virtual student, to enhance communication skills and confidence in engaging others in day-to-day conversations. Participants will learn how to determine when someone needs help, how to talk to someone you're worried about, and where you can turn to for help (BSU, 2022). This app helps students help those who are struggling mentally in a safe and positive way.

By addressing remote preferences among students, the university offers TogetherAll, a mental health support app that anonymously connects students to mental health professionals 24/7 (BSU, 2022). Students can further access community blogs, self-help courses that address mental and physical health concerns offered through TogetherAll. Bridgewater State University has further partnered with WellTrack, a wellness app that tracks daily moods with online tools and courses to promote mental health wellness. These online resources help students understand feelings of stress, anxiety, and depression and teach you techniques to minimize these feelings. BSU continues to offer resources for its community and provides students the opportunities to create programs to support each other and the university.

### ***Students' Call to Action***

Bridgewater State University provides graduate students opportunities to engage in the university community, including the Graduate Professional Student Association. The Graduate Professional Student Association (GPSA) is the leading voice for the graduate students. This organization of graduate students aims to provide a sense of community, socialization and networking opportunities, and to ensure a successful post-graduate experience for all graduate students at the university. GPSA members address graduate student needs through

collaborations with other departments and programs available at BSU as well as creating and implementing new programs and committees.

Since the onset of the pandemic, graduate students have expressed mental health concerns that impact academic success. Responding to expressed concerns, GPSA created “The Graduate Student Wellness and Resources Committee.” This committee aims to help BSU graduate students begin and continue their self-care journeys to address their wellness in achieving academic success. The committee’s mission is to support graduate students' mental and emotional well-being throughout their program. In pursuit of the mission, the committee strives to improve the graduate student's overall mental health through connecting students to available resources, services, and programs. Since the committee's formation, members have implemented Mindful Monday resources to promote and provide wellness tools for students via email and social media outlets. The Wellness and Resource Committee continues to address students’ needs through collaborations and partnerships on and off campus with the support of Bridgewater State University. The university has been responsive to the needs of its students, and with various efforts being made across departments, student wellness needs are being addressed in ways that are best tailored to the community, though there is always the opportunity to grow and provide additional resources.

The conversation on wellness and self-care has begun and is snowballing across departments, schools, and universities, and it is time to meet our students where they are at with compassion and support to keep them enrolled, healthy, and with lifelong wellness. Students at Bridgewater State University, especially graduate students, have expressed barriers in utilizing campus wellness resources. Students must be included in the conversation and execution of wellness resources on campus to best address the unique needs of this community. To best respond to this community’s needs, a wellness committee must be established for the voices of students to be heard and acknowledged in collaboration with professors and faculty.

Through continued dialogue, the university can continue to spread awareness and support for its students, their wellness, and academic success.

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